

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Anne H.K. Apple
Sunday, August 2, 2020

Isaiah 30:18-22

Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you;
therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you.

For the Lord is a God of justice;
blessed are all those who wait for him.

19 Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. 20 Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. 21 And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."

Matthew 14:13-21

13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.

But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. 14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 15 When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

16 Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." 17 They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." 18 And he said, "Bring them here to me." 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Twenty years ago, I was a student at Columbia Seminary when I first heard the name Steve Montgomery.

The Columbia Friendship Circle was hosting a luncheon and students were invited. Introduced to an older member of the group, she learned that I was originally from Memphis. She said, "Oh, we hear they have a new pastor *up there* at Idlewild. He came from around these parts in Georgia. His name is Steve Montgomery. We heard he has a beard AND that he has already brought a *guitar (git-tar)* into the pulpit.

Twenty years later, I am so much richer for having more context for that guitar (*git-tar*) in the pulpit - having been mentored by Steve as a pastor, colleague and friend. I can still hear his voice singing those justice songs - belting those gospel songs, "I'll fly away, O Lordy, I'll fly away to a land where joy will never end, I'll fly away!"

Last year, Steve stated that in retirement, he would "put away his alarm clock and buy a bike." That bike gave him freedom and joy. A bike with a bell that he would ring and young

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children from his neighborhood would come outside after dinner gleefully shouting, “Pastor Steve! Pastor Steve!” A bike he enjoyed riding all over town, seeing congregants and stopping to talk as they were doing yard work or as he pedaled past them running through Overton Park.

This week, we’ve prayed a lot of prayers. I’m grateful for those prayers and especially for Sara’s leadership. Not only have we prayed, we have cried. In this place of disbelief and disorientation, I have heard the prophet Isaiah’s voice, and it’s been a whisper, but more powerful than a shout, “You shall hear a word behind you saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it.’”

This prophetic voice, this snippet of instruction from Isaiah, shaped hope for a Jewish community disconnected from their faith. A community lost in the throes of having turned away from God.

Our congregation, staff and community are dealing with an absolute, unexpected collective trauma. As a church, we share this experience of helplessness, and the disorientation that comes when we can’t “do” anything to fix this profound loss. The Lord knows we feel it. And in this wilderness, we must turn to God. Together, with God, we will find the way and walk in it.

In this wilderness place, where we know the bread of adversity and water of affliction, the Teacher will not hide. The prophet tells us our eyes will see the teacher, and our ears will hear, “This is the way. Walk in it.”

Bread and water, adversity and affliction - this is Old Testament language for the pain of the trials and tribulations of living a life separated from God.

In a sense, Jesus knew the bread of adversity and the water of affliction. His good friend, John the Baptist, had been violently put to death. John the Baptist, the locust-eating prophet who announced the Kingdom of God was absolutely silenced by the powers of the world. Herod killed him.

The disciples take John’s body and bury it, and then they go and tell Jesus about it.

When Jesus hears the news, he gets into a boat and goes to a deserted place. I know that feeling about hearing hard news, “Just leave me alone. I need space.” We know that feeling of hearing hard news.

When we hear difficult news, the world wants us to be afraid, to run away, to isolate. And Jesus, the Teacher, shows us how to see and to be in that fear.

Although he’s in a boat and although he’s withdrawn, when he goes ashore, there at the water’s edge, a crowd has gathered. Having also heard the news, the people are in need of healing - both physical and emotional. They are grieving.

And there, Jesus has compassion for the people and continues his work of healing by curing the sick. Jesus acts with true and perfect gentleness. Jesus acts with compassion.

Kneeling down, I imagine Jesus looks into the eyes of a young child, listening to a sad heart story, and offers a promise - Holding a child’s gaze, he says, “I love you. And you are mine.” I imagine a woman, tired from medical treatments that don’t work, shaking her head in despair and Jesus places a ‘be-made-well’ hand on her shoulder, smiles and says, “I love you. And you are mine.” And then a widow, who knows the pain of inconsolable loss, locks eyes with him, and hears him say, ‘I will not leave you, nor forsake you’ “I love you. And you are mine.”

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And in the midst of this beauty, the disciples interrupt with their dutiful truth. “Jesus - This is wilderness. Evening is drawing near. Stomachs will grumble. You have got to send them away to take care of themselves.” The disciples offer practical and worldly truth.

And Jesus reminds the disciples of their calling. “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” And their answer is that lackluster, oblivious to who was right in front of them, answer. “We don’t have enough.”

And Jesus says, “Bring them here to me.” It’s Jesus’ way. A presence like no other - a presence in the midst of the darkness of fear - a presence in the midst of hunger - a trusting, healing, nurturing presence.

“Bring them here to me.”

Friends with an intensity like I have never felt before, we are being brought before Jesus.

Where the world wants us to be afraid, God invites us to trust.

Where the world preaches scarcity, God provides abundance.

Where the world wants us to be hungry, God invites us to Table.

This is the way. Let us walk in it together.